

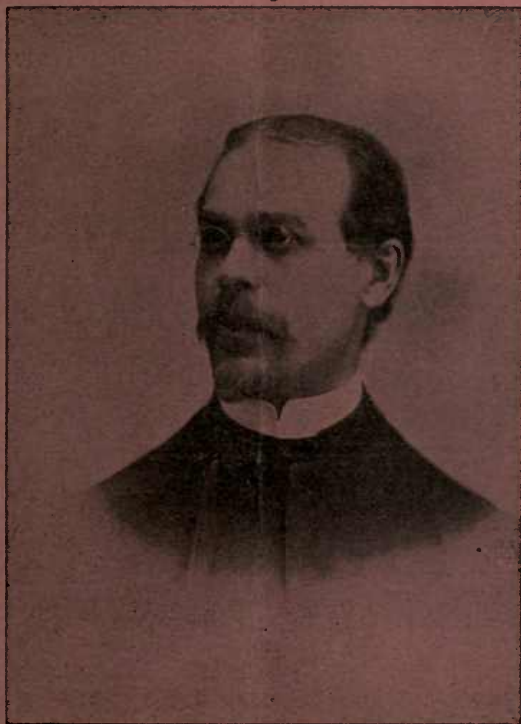
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Miriam the Prophetess.



A SERMON

—BY—

Bernard M. Kaplan

RABBI OF MCGILL COLLEGE AVENUE SYNAGOGUE

MONTREAL:

OWEN PRINTING HOUSE.

1901.

Miriam the Prophetess.

A SERMON

DELIVERED ON SABBATH "SHEMOTH," 5661.

—BY—

Bernard M. Kaplan

MINISTER OF MCGILL COLLEGE AVENUE SYNAGOGUE

(*SH.AAR-H.ASHOM.AYIM*).

MONTREAL.

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Miriam the Prophetess.*

For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Michah, VI. 4.

Miriam is, thus, ranked by the Prophet as one of the three great deliverers who led Israel from the deep valley of Egyptian darkness to the lofty heights of Sinai, the inspiring mount of holiness and light, of liberty and the Law. The Prophet is not bestowing any too lavish an encomium upon this most wonderful and remarkable woman in Israel. She had, certainly, been instrumental in moulding the glorious destiny of the Hebrew race. As I shall point out later, it was chiefly to her happy thoughtfulness that Moses owed his spiritual enthusiasm which he cherished for his suffering race, and the sublime religion of the Patriarchs.

Miriam's name appears in four different scenes in the Bible, and under four different circumstances.

I.

That the Jew thrives because he is thrifty, and survives because he belongs to the fittest, is no more his fault than it is the fault of the eagle that it soars

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the highest, and the lion because nature has endowed him with superior strength. It is as natural for the Jew to survive and thrive in the air of freedom as it is natural for the bird to sing, for the plant to grow, and for the stream to flow. The Jew, living a life in accordance with nature and reason, morality and religion, must in the very nature of things develop and flourish. Hence we read in to-day's portion of the Law: "And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them." Pharosah, the Egyptian Czar, became jealous of the growing power of the Hebrews. He consulted with his colleagues and declared: "Come on, let us deal wisely with them; lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there falleth out any war they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us, and they will go up out of the land." Oh, you benighted Egyptian! Do you reasonably expect the children of Israel to be your friends, if you crush and oppress them? Do you not suppose that fair treatment is a much surer way of gaining their loyalty and their love? If you protect their rights and respect their lives, will they not reciprocate? What cause would they then have to join your enemies? Are not your suspicions rather the indication of an evil imagination and a bad conscience? The Bible, however, tells us "that they set over them task-masters to afflict them with their burdens, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field; all their service, wherein they

made them serve, was with rigour." Such was the blind policy of the Egyptian rulers. Israel's bubbling enthusiasm for work and progress, his wonderful energy, and his ever-growing desire to lead a life of activity and usefulness must be repressed by special legislation. Lest a hero arise in Israel, who will espouse the cause of his downcast brethren, Pharaoh issues a *lawless law*. "And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, Every son that is born (of Hebrew parents) ye shall cast into the river...." He is not to join the industrial and productive forces of the land. No ! He is to be as food for the hideous crocodile of the Nile.

II.

A beautiful baby-boy was born unto Amram and Jochebed. He brought a ray of cheer and joy into the lowly and humble dwelling of these afflicted slaves. But, alas, though born of the flesh and blood of these Hebrew people, he was claimed by the River Nile as its vietim. The tender mother, however, concealed him. She evaded the law of the land. How could she do otherwise ? It is so hard to observe a lawless law, an inhuman edict, special legislation which applies to one class of human beings and grants immunities to others. There is one law which is above every made law, and that is the eternal law of humanity, the divine law of love and sympathy. What else should she have done ? Was she to flee from the land of slavery with her darling child clasped in her arms and pressed to her bosom, as did the brave Eliza, the

heroine of Uncle Tom's Cabin, some 3500 years later. The surroundings and the conditions in which Jochebed found herself did not permit any such step. The Ohio River, on which the fleeing Southern slave crossed was frozen. The ice was frail, it is true. Still there was some ice on which the human foot might venture to step. But the Nile never freezes, and the Old Testament does not relate of any human beings walking on water. Besides that, there was no free and blessed Canada at that time to offer a home to the refugee-slave such as the fleeing slaves found in this most humane country.

Jochabed could no longer hide the child with any degree of safety. If the child was discovered in her possession, not only would he have been lost, but possibly, the whole family as well, for, indeed, there must have been a severe penalty for those who attempted to shelter their male children. Remembering probably, how God had saved Noah from the waters of the flood by means of an ark, she hoped and prayed that her child might be spared from the watery grave by similar means. "She made an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink." Miriam, who, according to tradition, was as yet a child herself, now appears on the scene. She "stood afar off to wit what would be done to him. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among

the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it. And when she had opened it, she saw the child; and behold, the child wept." His sweet angelic face told his origin. The Princess exclaimed: "This is one of the Hebrews' children!" His sister Miriam, solicitous for the welfare of her little brother, mustered courage and drew near the royal retinue. Before the Princess declared what she would do with this precious treasure, little Miriam divined as if by natural instinct, that the tender heart of a woman would never permit an innocent child to be hurled into the treacherous river.

The child is saved from the watery grave, but what will be his future? It was a critical moment for this Hebrew infant. Suppose he is brought up in an Egyptian home, under Egyptian influence, he is lost anyway, lost to his parents, lost to his race, lost to his religion. He might yet become an Egyptian task-master, an oppressor and persecutor of his people. No doubt some such reflections must have filled the anxious heart and the thoughtful mind of this little Hebrew girl as she gazed with tearful eyes upon the weeping babe. This thoughtful child conceived of a happy plan which, if successful, would solve the difficulty. She offered to run for a nurse. "Shall I go," said Miriam, "and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?" And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." Miriam brought on the scene the happy mother. The Princess entrusted the child to her care. "Take this child away," said she, "and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages."

Such are the wonders of Providence ! Such are the thrilling incidents of the trend of Biblical narrative ! The child is not only restored to his mother's arms to be brought up under the wholesome influence of the ideal Hebrew home life, but Jochebed, though a slave, is even to receive her wages for nursing her own child. But the greatest reward to the happy mother was the opportunity of implanting in the susceptible mind of her child the holy teachings and traditions of the Patriarchs, that the tribes of Levi, to which she belonged, is supposed to have been preserving as a sacred trust. The time came when he was obliged to depart from his mother's fond embrace, but by that time he had already received a fundamental training in the traditional morality and religion of the Patriarchs, on which he was to build the structure of his life. The impressions which he had received as a child under the careful guidance of his pious mother and sister, no doubt, shaped and moulded his great and glorious career, the benefit of which humanity is still reaping. Much of a man's life depends, indeed, upon his early training. "Early impressions," says the great German poet, Goethe, "are never shaken off." No greater pedagogic principle has ever been expressed than the one in Proverbs, which says : 'Train up a child in the way he should go, and he will not depart from it when he is old.' His mother and his sister Miriam no doubt, impressed upon his mind more than once that, though he would live in the lap of luxury at the royal palace, he dared not forget his afflicted and suffering brethren.

Nay, he was to use his elevated rank and position as a means of alleviating the misery of his brethren in faith. Perhaps he took an oath by everything that was sacred to him to be an enemy of Israel's oppressors, as Hannibal was made to swear at the altar by his father Hamlicar to be forever hostile to Rome, the ancient foe of Carthage.

III.

The Child of the Nile became the favourite child of the Court. He was the adopted son of Her Royal Highness, the Princess, with happy prospects for power and fame, but above all he was a child of the people, a son of the covenant of Abraham. His name Moses which meant "drawn out of the water," continually reminded him of the afflictions and the burdens of his brethren. Both during his stay at the sumptuous palace in Egypt and his many years of rumination in the lonely pasture fields on the hills of Midian, one absorbing thought haunted him day and night, namely how to save the noble descendants of the Patriarchs from being drudging slaves of the wicked Pharaohs. By the aid of Providence his life's aim was realized. The children of Israel were free at last. They had crossed the Red Sea of Persecution, and were resting safely on the other side of the water, nearer to the Land of Promise, the land of milk and honey, of liberty and the Law. The shore was strewn with the bodies of Israel's foes who were no longer a menace to the liberty-loving people. The scene on that eventful morning of Israel's triumph was so sublime and so in-

spiring that the soul of Moses, the statesman, the man of practical affairs, was touched by the magic wand of the poetic muse, giving vent to a most sublime song, equal to that most glorious occasion. "I will sing unto the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously : the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea."

Miriam now appears again in the History of Israel. She fired the hearts and inspired the souls of her sisters in faith. They shared in the great deliverance. They must also share in the song of praise. While Moses led the men of Israel, she led the women, and organized them into a chorus, calling upon them to raise their sweet voices to God. "Sing ye to the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously : the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea." From that great historic day music and poetry were part and parcel of the Hebrew genius and of the Hebrew life. They lightened the Jewish burdens in time of sorrow, and brightened the happy occasions in time of joy.

IV.

Miriam appears in a third Biblical scene, not, however, in that graceful, womanly garb of sympathy and tenderness, as in the first two. Human nature is, alas, too frail to be perfect. Man, though "made a little lower than the angels," is but too human to be infallible. The best and greatest men and women have not been free from blemish and blunder, fault and foible. "For there is not a righteous person upon earth who doeth good and sinneth not," said Ecclesiastes. Miriam appears in the third scene of her life

as being somewhat captious and a little too querulous. She was censuring her great and illustrious brother for having married a Cushite woman. Her objection, as such, was not altogether without justification. His matrimonial alliance, it is true, was not in harmony with his ideal character and his sublime aims and aspirations. His children did not become great shining lights in Israel. They did not continue the good work where their great sire had left off. The spiritual standstill and decay of his immediate family is, no doubt, traceable to the uncongeniality of his matrimonial union. Were there not God-fearing and lovely daughters in Israel? Miriam, as a loving sister and pious woman, to whom Moses owed so much, had a right to reprove her brother. Her great sin, however, consisted in spreading dissention and discord in the camp of Israel. She incited Aaron, and both she and her oldest brother rose against the authority of Moses. And they said: "Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath He not spoken also by us?" Their murmuring hurled nearly all Israel into a whirlpool of insurrection. By carping and caviling at Moses, and by casting a shadow on his authority, they brought on indirectly the awful rebellion of Korah with its dark consequences. They did something more than point out his one error. They undervalued his great worth, his stirring virtues, and his superior qualifications, which made him the most ideal leader of his people. "And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses." The greatest

man, however, is liable to commit an error, but that does not justify inferior men to place him at once on the same level with themselves. The Mighty Spirit of Justice rebuked Aaron and Miriam for their misconduct. "My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house." Notwithstanding his error, there is still a difference between the faithful Moses and others. Many a person can descend to the commission of his error, but how few can rise to the height of his idealism, the dignity and grandeur of his character, the nobility and the sublimity of his self-sacrificing life? "Wherefore, then, were ye not afraid to speak against My servant, Moses?"


Miriam, at a very advanced age, was stricken with leprosy. This awful disease had been deemed by Providence a fitting punishment for sowing seeds of dissention. Both the leper and the instigator are a menace to society, and one as well as the other should be segregated from human association. According to our Talmudic sages, (who more than any ethical teachers of any other nation were deeply interested in every shade of morality both in thought or action), the evil of intriguing is no less grave than the denial of the existence of God. Aaron, for whose sin of the Golden Calf, Moses pleaded so fervently, was even more ungracious in finding fault with the great leader out of mere jealousy of his power and eminence. His penalty might have been even severer than that of Miriam, if he had not repented and poured out his soul in contrite prayer; "Alas, my Lord, I beseech Thee, lay

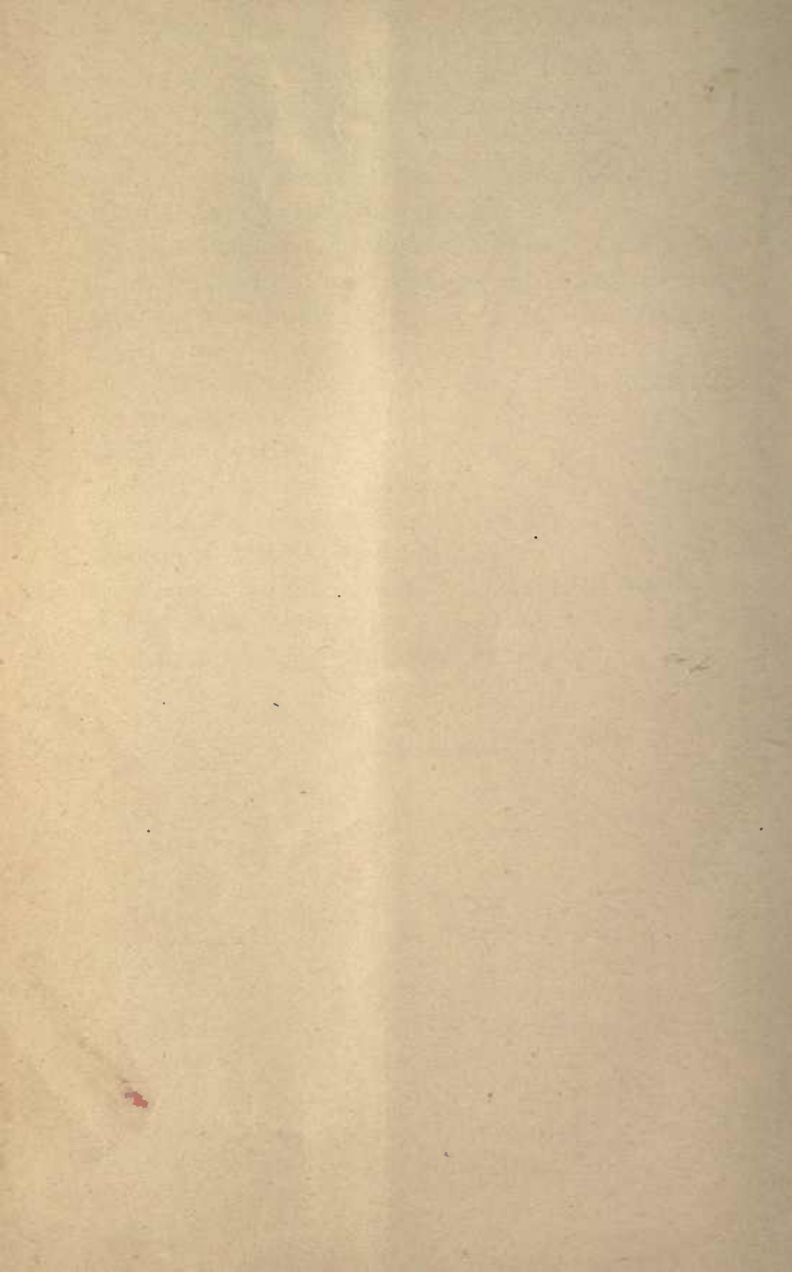
not the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned." Moses, who possessed a magnanimous soul, pleaded and prayed for them who had wronged him. In a truly humane and religious spirit, he forgave and forgot. Miriam was restored to her health and her home. She became, as before, a loving sister, a noble woman, a true mother in Israel.

V.

The last scene in which Miriam's name is mentioned is one through which we all must pass. Not many of us enjoy the privilege and the honour to shine so gloriously as did Miriam in the first two acts of her life's drama. Some of us pass through the third scene of her life, perhaps with immunity, but all of us are bound to go through the last scene of her life. In the fourth act of her life's drama we stand by her death-couch. She died on a lonely mountain in the Wilderness of Zin, in the early part of spring, just when nature begins to revive, and the flowers commence to make their appearance. According to historical tradition, all Israel went into deep mourning for thirty days as a token of the great esteem in which she was held by the entire nation. The anniversary of her death was observed by her grateful people for many ages. Our ancestors, with their peculiar sense of gratefulness and sympathy, forgot the one painful incident of her life, and only remembered the great services which she had rendered to the nation by keeping tender watch over her infant brother who became liberator and law-giver. They remembered

her as having been instrumental in bringing her baby brother back to the training and influence of an ideal Hebrew home, where seeds of love and humanity were deeply rooted in his soul to bear sweet and wholesome fruit for all ages to come. They remembered her as having kindled in the breasts of her sisters in faith a halo of religious enthusiasm, the glowing splendour of which continued to shed joy for many ages. She was the Hebrew Florence Nightingale, who cheered and comforted the weary and sore wanderers in the Desert. As such, Miriam is ranked by the Prophet as one of the three great deliverers of Israel. May her memory continue to live in the grateful hearts of her nation, and may she forever be a living source of inspiration to the mothers and daughters of Israel.





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